

2.0 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

San Luis Obispo County's rural character, beautiful and accessible coastal areas, rolling hills, and mild climate combine to create a distinct and desirable quality of life. The unincorporated areas of the county have experienced dramatic growth since the adoption of most of the General Plan elements in the past 10-20 years. The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors directed County staff to update and consolidate multiple elements of the General Plan into a new Conservation and Open Space Element in response to development patterns and demographic trends since the adoption of the existing elements, emerging issues, and a need to improve the usability of the document.

The proposed COSE Consolidation and Update will consolidate and revise five adopted General Plan elements (Conservation, Historic, Esthetic, Energy and Open Space); incorporate key issues from other General Plan elements, Community Plans and Area Plans; and add new environmental issues (water resources, air quality, green building), to create a Conservation and Open Space Element with nine policy chapters.

2.1 PROJECT APPLICANT

County of San Luis Obispo
County Government Center
San Luis Obispo, CA 93408

2.2 REGIONAL AND LOCAL SETTING

San Luis Obispo County is located along California's Central Coast. The county is bounded by the Pacific Ocean to the west, Monterey County to the north, Kern County to the east, and San Barbara County to the south. The region is known predominately for agriculture and tourism.

San Luis Obispo County was established in 1850 and the county seat is the City of San Luis Obispo. There are seven incorporated cities within the county: Arroyo Grande, Atascadero, Grover Beach, Morro Bay, Paso Robles, Pismo Beach, and San Luis Obispo. Urban concentrations and communities in the unincorporated portions of the county include Avila Beach, Cambria, Cayucos, Garden Farms, Heritage Ranch, Los Osos/Baywood Park, Nipomo, Oceano, San Simeon, Santa Margarita, Halcyon, San Miguel, Shandon, and Templeton. The urban areas within the county are linked to the primary transportation corridors serving the region: Interstate Highways 1 and 101 and State Highway 46. The city of San Luis Obispo is the employment, entertainment, education, and shopping center of the region both geographically and economically. The county's urban and populated areas are concentrated near cities such as San Luis Obispo, Atascadero, and Paso Robles, and in rural communities such as Shandon and Nacimiento. **Figure 2-1** illustrates cities and urban in San Luis Obispo County.



PHYSICAL FEATURES

According the U.S. Census Bureau, San Luis Obispo County has a total area of 3,616 square miles. Of this total area, 3,304 square miles are land and 311 square miles are water. The county's coastline spans 96 miles. San Luis Obispo County has a temperate climate. On average, the warmest month is August, with temperatures ranging from 53 to 82 degrees, and the coolest month is December, with temperatures ranging from 42 to 66 degrees. The maximum average

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precipitation occurs in February (5.41 inches on average). However, microclimates within the county differ in temperature and rainfall. Areas near the coast remain cooler and more temperate overall, while areas inland are hot in the summer and cool in the winter. Coastal areas have a higher rate of precipitation than inland areas. The county's microclimates affect the diversity and range of plant and animal species within the county. The county includes a wide variety of habitats and ecosystems due to the weather differences. The topography is diverse but generally consists of rolling hills.

LAND USES

San Luis Obispo County is physically diverse, ranging from beaches to mountains and valleys. The majority of land in San Luis Obispo County is used for agriculture (more than 60 percent). Of this acreage, approximately 85 percent is used for livestock grazing (primarily cattle) and 8 percent is actively farmed and harvested. Most of the county's remaining land is used for rural land uses and open space. Rural land uses are distributed throughout the county. Open space comprises large areas that extend northwest-southeast in the southern portion of the county's central area. Less than 10 percent of the county's land is identified as incorporated city or designated for urban land use. Current development patterns are often dominated by low density, automobile-oriented development outside of the urbanized areas.

In recognition of the specific concerns of individual areas throughout the region, the unincorporated county is divided into two major Planning Areas: the Coastal Zone and the Inland Area, and further sub-divided into the following 15 unique planning areas:

- Adelaida Inland Area
- Estero Area
- Las Pilitas Inland Area
- Nacimiento Inland Area
- Salinas River Inland Area
- San Luis Bay Inland Area
- Shandon-Carrizo Inland Area
- South County Inland Area
- El Pomar Estrella Inland Area
- Huasna-Lopez Inland Area
- Los Padres Inland Area
- North Coast Area
- San Luis Bay Coastal Area
- San Luis Obispo Inland Area
- South County Coastal Area

The existing San Luis Obispo General Plan, Land Use Ordinance, and other implementing ordinances currently guide the land uses in the unincorporated county. The reader is referred to **Section 3.08** (Land Use and Planning) for a description of land use and applicable land use plans.

2.3 AREAS UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF OTHER AGENCIES

Areas that are controlled by agencies other than the County are not generally subject to the provisions in the County General Plan. These areas typically have their own distinct planning process and land use guidelines/policies. In San Luis Obispo County, the seven incorporated cities (Arroyo Grande, Atascadero, Grover Beach, Morro Bay, Paso Robles, Pismo Beach, and San Luis Obispo) are separate jurisdictions. In addition, federal lands, such as those managed by the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and military agencies, as well as state lands are not subject to the County's General Plan. State facilities include the California Men's Colony, Atascadero State Hospital, state parks and recreation areas, and other public facilities.

FIGURE 2-1 SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY PLANNING AREA MAP



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2.4 PROJECT BACKGROUND AND PLANNING FRAMEWORK

REQUIREMENT TO ADOPT A GENERAL PLAN

California State law requires each city and county to adopt a general plan "for the physical development of the county or city, and any land outside its boundaries which bears relation to its planning" and is in effect, a local agency's constitution for future development. The general plan addresses a broad range of topics, including, at a minimum, the following State mandated elements: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise and safety. In addressing these topics, the general plan identifies the goals, policies, standards, and implementation programs that support the specific jurisdiction's vision for the area. In addition, State law allows for the adoption of additional or optional elements of a general plan to address subject of particular concern to the county or city.

The general plan typically addresses the physical development during a twenty-year period. Although the general plan serves as a blueprint for future development and identifies the overall vision for the planning area, the plan should remain general enough to allow for flexibility in the approach taken to achieve its goals.

State planning and zoning law establishes that zoning ordinances, which are laws that commonly define allowable land uses, provide development standards and thresholds within specific zoning districts. The zoning ordinance is required to be consistent with the general plan and any applicable specific plans. When amendments to the general plan are made, corresponding changes in the zoning ordinance may be required within a reasonable time to ensure consistency between the revised land use designations in the general plan (if any) and the permitted uses or development.

THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE

The San Luis Obispo County General Plan identifies the County's development goals and policies relative to the distribution of future land uses and provides a basis for local government land use decisions as well as informs citizens, developers, and decision-makers of the guidelines for development within the county. In addition to the State mandated elements, the County adopted seven optional elements: Agriculture, Economic, Energy, Esthetic, Historic, Offshore Energy, and Parks and Recreation.

On August 1, 2006, the Board of Supervisors directed staff to update the current adopted General Plan by preparing a Conservation and Open Space Element (COSE). As noted previously in this section, the COSE would improve the usability and effectiveness of the General Plan document by consolidating various elements of the adopted General Plan and incorporating additional smart growth principles and resource-based policies.

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY PLANNING FRAMEWORK

San Luis Obispo County is divided into two major planning areas 1) the coastal zone, established as a result of the California Coastal Act of 1976, and 2) the inland area. Each of these two large areas is further broken down into 15 "planning areas" as described earlier in this chapter.

Individual area plans and standards address a particular planning area within the General Plan planning area; they are adopted as part of the Land Use and Circulation Element. Each of the area plans is required to be consistent with the overall General Plan. The area plans also provide

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maps showing detailed overlays of environmental concern, called “Combining Designations.” This overlay distinction requires special design and/or development considerations to provide for more detailed review when necessary for environmental issues such as sensitive habitats, flood hazards, and other natural resources.

Two Land Use Ordinances, the Inland Land Use Ordinance (Title 22) and the Coastal Land Use Ordinance (Title 23), govern land use in the county. Both ordinances provide specific land use definition, standards, and thresholds consistent with the goals and policies of the adopted General Plan and the Area Plans. The Coastal Land Use Ordinance is part of the County’s Local Coastal Program, consistent with the California Coastal Act.

New development within the communities of Cambria, San Miguel, Santa Margarita, Templeton, and the West Tefft Corridor are guided by individual design plans adopted by the County Board of Supervisors. In addition, specific plans are in place to direct development in Avila Beach, Black Lake, Los Ranchos Edna Village, Oceano, and the Woodlands.

Overall planning guidelines on how growth should occur in a more sustainable manner are provided by the Strategic Growth Principles, which the County adopted in 2005. The principles seek to achieve the County’s vision and mission “to enhance the economic, environmental, and social quality of life in San Luis Obispo County.” Specifically, the principles aim to:

- Strengthen Regional Cooperation
- Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas
- Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities
- Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place
- Provide a Variety of Transportation and Land Use Choices
- Create a Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices
- Encourage Mixed Land Uses
- Create Walkable Neighborhoods and Towns
- Take Advantage of Compact Building Design
- Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective
- Encourage Community Stakeholder Collaboration

The reader is referred to **Section 3.8** (Land Use) for a more detailed description of the County’s planning framework and applicable land use plans.

2.5 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of the COSE Consolidation and Update are to:

- Update and consolidate relevant conservation and open space policies from several County General Plan elements into one document so they are easier to find and use.
- Apply the County’s Strategic Growth Principles as the framework.
- Add to or expand policies and programs in response to changing community needs and issues.
- Establish the County as a leader in natural resource conservation, open space preservation, and climate protection.

New conservation and open space policies and strategies have been included to address gaps in existing elements, emerging issues and challenges, new (or anticipated) state requirements and comments from stakeholders.

2.6 PROJECT COMPONENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The proposed project is the adoption and subsequent implementation of the COSE Consolidation and Update for unincorporated San Luis Obispo County. The proposed COSE unites five elements of the existing General Plan including three elements (Conservation, Historic, and Esthetic) of the Environment Plan, the Energy Element, and the Open Space Element (extracted from the Agriculture and Open Space Element). Each of these five elements is briefly described below:

- 1) **Environment Plan, Conservation Element (1974):** This Element contained policies regarding water conservation, water pollution, flood control, air resources, and biological resources.
- 2) **Environment Plan, Historic Element (1974):** Contained historical and archaeological resource policies.
- 3) **Environment Plan, Esthetic Element (1974):** Contained noise, odor, and visual policies.
- 4) **Energy Element (1995):** Addressed energy conservation and efficiency, distribution and generation.
- 5) **Open Space Element (1998):** Addressed open space, scenic resources, cultural resources, biological resources, recreation areas, natural area preserves, streams and riparian corridors, and marine resources.

In addition, the proposed project revises the existing goals, policies, and programs of these elements, incorporates new information to address current environmental conditions, conservation issues and strategies, and organizes the information to improve the usability of the document.

The proposed COSE addresses all of the topics previously identified in the separate five elements as well as new issues, policies and strategies in the following nine chapters:

- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Energy
- Mineral Resources
- Open Space
- Soil Resources
- Visual Resources
- Water Resources

An overview of each of these COSE chapters is provided below:

AIR QUALITY

The Air Quality chapter of the proposed COSE provides air quality goals, policies, and implementation strategies designed to improve local and regional air quality and to reduce local contributions to climate change (i.e., greenhouse gas emissions). The intent is that

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improved air quality will in turn improve public health, boost the local economy, and reduce pollution damage to trees, crops, plants, lakes, animals, and buildings.

The current and projected air quality challenges for San Luis Obispo County are grouped into three categories in this chapter: local air quality, regional air pollution, and global climate change.

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Biological resources in the county include major ecosystems; threatened, rare, and endangered species and their habitats; native trees and vegetation; creeks and riparian areas; wetlands; fisheries; and marine resources. Individual species, habitat areas, ecosystems and migration patterns must be considered together in order to sustain biological resources.

This chapter provides goals, policies, and implementation strategies to identify and protect biological resources throughout San Luis Obispo County.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

The Cultural Resource chapter presents goals, policies, and implementation strategies to identify and protect areas, sites, and buildings having architectural, historical, paleontological, or cultural significance.

ENERGY

This chapter provides energy goals, policies and implementation strategies to identify energy needs, conserve and use energy efficiently, develop and use local, renewable energy and achieve energy-efficient development.

Several of the major issues described in the 1995 Energy Element are incorporated into the proposed chapter, including those policies related to energy conservation and efficiency, sustainable energy supplies, renewable energy sources and green building.

MINERAL RESOURCES

The Mineral Resources chapter of the COSE provides goals, policies, and implementation strategies to identify and protect mineral resources for present and future generations.

OPEN SPACE RESOURCES

The Open Space chapter presents open space goals, policies and implementation strategies to conserve, protect, manage, and restore irreplaceable open space resources for current and future generations. The intent is that implementation of these strategies will result in scenic, recreational, health, safety, economic and other benefits. The open space chapter addresses issues of special importance to open space and other resources, such as agriculture.

SOIL RESOURCES

This chapter provides goals, policies, and implementation strategies to protect and retain soils that are a critical component of the county's physical landscape. The soils in San Luis Obispo are vital for nourishing the various vegetative habitats and are essential for the production of food and fiber.

VISUAL RESOURCES

The Visual Resource chapter presents goals, policies, and implementation strategies to protect the visual character and identity of the county while protecting private property rights. The intent of these strategies are to: 1) maintain a sense of place recognized by residents, 2) preserve intact scenic landscapes that are highly valued by residents and visitors, and 3) maintain a high quality visual environment that enhances tourism, real estate values and economic growth. The visual resources chapter guides the appropriate placement of development so that 1) the natural landscape continues to be the dominant view in rural parts of the county and 2) in urban areas, to ensure that visual character contributes to a robust sense of place.

WATER RESOURCES

Water resources issues include water supply, groundwater monitoring and management, water quality, conservation, water resource management, and flood control. The County recognizes water as a valuable and scarce resource; it is essential for the county's environmental, social, and economic well-being and for the public health. The intent of the water resources goals, policies, and implementation strategies presented in this chapter is to achieve a sustainable water supply, protect water quality and natural communities, and control flooding.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE PROPOSED COSE CONSOLIDATION AND UPDATE TO THE ADOPTED GENERAL PLAN

Once adopted, the new COSE would replace the Environment Plan of 1974 (Historic Element, Conservation Element, and Esthetic Element), the Energy Element (1994), and the Open Space Element (1998).

It is important to note that the COSE has extracted the Open Space Element out of the existing the Agriculture and Open Space Element and does not modify, amend or replace the Agricultural Element of the 1998 document. Modifications or amendments to the Agricultural Element may occur but would be part of a future update process and would require separate environmental review.

The Conservation and Open Space Element emphasizes protection and management of natural resources, which integrates into land use planning processes. As such, other General Plan elements may still contain policies that address open space or conservation topics as part of other County objectives.

For example, the:

- **Land Use and Circulation Element** focuses on the types and intensities of development, and identifies strategic growth strategies that balance growth with natural resource protection. The Land Use Element includes all of the area plans, which apply land use combining designations (overlay zones) to identify and protect sensitive resources.
- **Safety Element** is concerned mainly with avoiding hazards from fire, flood, and unstable land, including areas where agriculture and natural landscape are often the most appropriate uses.
- **Parks and Recreation Element** contains goals and policies to acquire, develop, and maintain parkland, areas for passive and active recreation, and natural areas that protect sensitive resources.

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- **Agriculture Element** addresses agricultural issues. It is intended to balance protection of natural resources and open space with the needs of production agriculture and to minimize impacts to ongoing production agriculture.
- **Economic Element** promotes a diverse and balanced economy that is dependent upon natural resource conservation and protection.
- **Local Coastal Plan** addresses protection of natural resources within the designated coastal zone.
- **Off Shore Energy Element** includes resource discussions covering biological, fisheries and air quality issues as they relate to off shore energy development.

State law requires consistency among chapters of the General Plan. As such, goals and policies contained within the COSE should be interpreted and implemented consistent with the goals and policies of the rest of the General Plan.

2.7 INTENDED USES OF THE EIR

This EIR is intended to evaluate the environmental impacts of adoption and implementation of the COSE Consolidation and Update. This EIR should be used as the primary environmental document to evaluate all subsequent actions associated with projects in the county. Subsequent projects that may be associated with the project are identified in **Section 2.0** (Project Description) of this document and will be evaluated at the time they are considered to determine whether they would result in impacts that fall within those disclosed in this program EIR or whether subsequent environmental review is required. In addition, this EIR may be used to adopt CEQA significance thresholds.

2.8 PROJECT APPROVALS AND SUBSEQUENT ACTIONS

A set of actions must be taken by the County to complete the General Plan process, including certification of the EIR, adoption of a General Plan amendment, and other miscellaneous implementation actions. Each of these is described in more detail below.

CERTIFICATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Before taking action on the General Plan, the Board of Supervisors must certify that the EIR was completed in compliance with CEQA, which the Board reviewed and considered the information in the EIR before action was taken on the project, and that the EIR reflects the County's independent judgment and analysis.

ADOPTION OF THE GENERAL PLAN

The Board of Supervisors will consider adoption of the updated COSE (essentially a General Plan amendment) following certification of the EIR. This adoption may include the inclusion of any identified mitigation measures as policies and/or actions into the new COSE. Before adoption, the County is required to make specific findings of fact pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines, Sections 15090, 15091 and 15093 regarding the significant environmental impacts of the project, the feasibility of measures to mitigate those impacts, and, if appropriate, a statement of overriding considerations. The Board's action on the COSE will be based on consideration of recommendations of the San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission.

OTHER IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

After the General Plan is approved, the County departments may seek funding for and take the steps required to implement the new COSE. Implementation may involve pro-active steps such as adoption of zoning changes or carrying out “implementation strategies” included in the COSE.

2.9 REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS, PERMITS, AND APPROVALS

No permits or approvals are required from other agencies for the proposed COSE Consolidation and Update.